

# “Outdoor Space and Outdoor Activities”

from *Life Between Buildings* (1980)

Jan Gehl

## Editors' Introduction

Beginning in the 1960s writers such as Jacobs, Lynch, William H. Whyte, Clare Cooper Marcus, and Danish designer Jan Gehl emphasized the need to base urban design on study of how people actually experience and use urban environments. A new discipline of environmental design emerged, devoted to researching how built environments work for people. Researchers developed methods using behavior observation, time-lapse photography, post-occupancy evaluation surveys, and cognitive mapping (in which people were asked to draw maps or images of how they perceived their urban environments) to provide factual information for improved urban design.

In his pioneering book *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1980), Gehl took a remarkably perceptive look at different types of outdoor spaces and their social uses. What is most needed, he argued, is an increase in optional activities taking place in the public realm. The number and variety of human interactions, especially chance meetings in public spaces, was in his view the way to a healthier urban community. Analyzing public spaces within Copenhagen, he found places such as the Stroget (one of Europe's pioneering pedestrian streets) and the Tivoli Gardens particularly conducive to social life. Although many of Gehl's observations may seem common sense today, they represented a major departure from modernist urban design practices in which abstract architectural principles, rather than careful observation of how people actually use places, often dictated urban form. Other books in this vein include Whyte's *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington, DC: The Conservation Foundation, 1980), Marcus and Wendy Sarkissian's *Housing as if People Mattered*, Marcus and Carolyn Francis' *People Places* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990), and Lynch's *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960).

## THREE TYPES OF OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

An ordinary day on an ordinary street. Pedestrians pass on the sidewalks, children play near front doors, people sit on benches and steps, the postman makes his rounds with the mail, two passersby greet on the sidewalk, two mechanics

repair a car, groups engage in conversation. This mix of outdoor activities is influenced by a number of conditions. Physical environment is one of the factors: a factor that influences the activities to a varying degree and in many different ways. Outdoor activities, and a number of the physical conditions that influence them, are the subject of this book.

Greatly simplified, outdoor activities in public spaces can be divided into three categories, each of which places very different demands on the physical environment: *necessary activities*, *optional activities*, and *social activities*.

*Necessary activities* include those that are more or less compulsory – going to school or to work, shopping, waiting for a bus or a person, running errands, distributing mail – in other words, all activities in which those involved are to a greater or lesser degree required to participate.

In general, everyday tasks and pastimes belong to this group. Among other activities, this group includes the great majority of those related to walking.

Because the activities in this group are necessary, their incidence is influenced only slightly by the physical framework. These activities will take place throughout the year, under nearly all conditions, and are more or less independent of the exterior environment. The participants have no choice.

*Optional activities* – that is, those pursuits that are participated in if there is a wish to do so and if time and place make it possible – are quite another matter.

This category includes such activities as taking a walk to get a breath of fresh air, standing around enjoying life, or sitting and sunbathing.

These activities take place only when exterior conditions are optimal, when weather and place invite them. This relationship is particularly important in connection with physical planning because most of the recreational activities that are especially pleasant to pursue outdoors are found precisely in this category of activities. These activities are especially dependent on exterior physical conditions.

When outdoor areas are of poor quality, only strictly necessary activities occur.

When outdoor areas are of high quality, necessary activities take place with approximately the same frequency – though they clearly tend to take a longer time, because the physical conditions are better. In addition, however, a wide range of optional activities will also occur because place and situation now invite people to stop, sit, eat, plan, and so on.

In streets and city spaces of poor quality, only the bare minimum of activity takes place. People hurry home.

In a good environment, a completely different, broad spectrum of human activities is possible.

	Quality of the physical environment	
	Poor	Good
Necessary activities	●	●
Optional activities	•	●●●
"Resultant" activities (Social activities)	•	●

Figure 1. Graphic representation of the relationship between the quality of outdoor spaces and the rate of occurrence of outdoor activities. When the quality of outdoor areas is good, optional activities occur with increasing frequency. Furthermore, as levels of optional activity rise, the number of social activities usually increases substantially.

Social activities are all activities that depend on the presence of others in public spaces. Social activities include children at play, greetings and conversations, communal activities of various kinds, and finally – as the most widespread social activity – passive contacts, that is simply seeing and hearing other people.

Different kinds of social activities occur in many places: in dwellings; in private outdoor spaces, gardens, and balconies; in public buildings; at places of work; and so on; but in this context only those activities that occur in publicly accessible spaces are examined.

These activities could also be termed "resultant" activities, because in nearly all instances they evolve from activities linked to the other two activity categories. They develop in connection with the other activities because people are in the same space, meet, pass by one another, or are merely within view. . . .

[ . . . ]

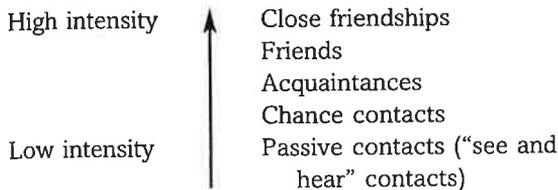
## LIFE BETWEEN BUILDINGS

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely what life between buildings means in relation to the *need for contact*.

Opportunities for meetings and daily activities in the public spaces of a city or residential area enable one to be among, to see, and to hear others, to experience other people functioning in various situations.

These modest "see and hear contacts" must be considered in relation to other forms of contact and as part of the whole range of social activities, from very simple and noncommittal contacts to complex and emotionally involved connections.

The concept of varying degrees of contact intensity is the basis of the following simplified outline of various contact forms:



In terms of this outline life between buildings represents primarily the low-intensity contacts located at the bottom of the scale. Compared with the other contact forms, these contacts appear insignificant, yet they are valuable both as independent contact forms and as prerequisites for other, more complex interactions.

Opportunities related to merely being able to meet, see, and hear others include:

- contact at a modest level
- a possible starting point for contact at other levels
- a possibility for maintaining already established contacts
- a source of information about the social world outside
- a source of inspiration, an offer of stimulating experience.

The possibilities related to the low-intensity contact forms offered in public spaces perhaps can best be described by the situation that exists if they are lacking.

If activity between buildings is missing, the lower end of the contact scale also disappears. The varied transitional forms between being alone and being together have disappeared. The boundaries between isolation and contact become sharper –

people are either alone or else with others on a relatively demanding and exacting level.

Life between buildings offers an opportunity to be with others in a relaxed and undemanding way. One can take occasional walks, perhaps make a detour along a main street on the way more or pause at an inviting bench near a front door to be among people for a short while. One can take a long bus ride every day, as many retired people have been found to do in large cities. Or one can do daily shopping, even that it would be more practical to do it once a week. Even looking out of the window now and then, if one is fortunate to have something to look at, can be rewarding. Being among others, seeing and hearing others, receiving impulses from others, imply positive experiences, alternatives to being alone. One is not necessarily with a specific person, but one is, nevertheless, with others.

As opposed to being a passive observer of other people's experiences on television or video or film, in public spaces the individual himself is present, participating in a modest way, but most definitely participating.

Low-intensity contact is also a situation from which other forms of contact can grow. It is a medium for the unpredictable, the spontaneous, the unplanned. . . .

[ . . . ]

The trend from living in lifeless cities and residential areas that has accompanied industrialization, segregation of various city functions, and reliance on the automobile also has caused cities to become duller and more monotonous. This points up another important need, namely *the need for stimulation*.

Experiencing other people represents a particularly colorful and attractive opportunity for stimulation. Compared with experiencing buildings and other inanimate objects, experiencing people, who speak and move about, offers a wealth of sensual variation. No moment is like the previous or the following when people circulate among people. The number of new situations and new stimuli is limitless. Furthermore it concerns the most important subject in life: people.

Living cities, therefore, ones in which people can act with one another, are always stimulating because they are rich in experiences, in contrast to lifeless cities, which can scarcely avoid being poor in experiences and thus dull, no matter how many

colors and variations of shape in buildings are introduced. . . .

[ . . . ]

## OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES AND THE QUALITY OF OUTDOOR SPACE

Life between buildings is discussed here because the extent and character of outdoor activities are greatly influenced by physical planning. Just as it is possible through choice of materials and colors to create a certain palette in a city, it is equally possible through planning decisions to influence patterns of activities, to create better or worse conditions for outdoor events, and to create lively or lifeless cities.

The spectrum of possibilities can be described by two extremes. One extreme is the city with multistory buildings, underground parking facilities, extensive automobile traffic, and long distances between buildings and functions. This type of city can be found in a number of North American and "modernized" European cities and in many suburban areas.

In such cities one sees buildings and cars, but few people, if any, because pedestrian traffic is more or less impossible, and because conditions for outdoor stays in the public areas near buildings are very poor. Outdoor spaces are large and impersonal. With great distances in the urban plan, there is nothing much to experience outdoors, and the few activities that do take place are spread out in time and space. Under these conditions most residents prefer to remain indoors in front of the television or on their balcony or in other comparably private outdoor spaces.

Another extreme is the city with reasonably low, closely spaced buildings, accommodation for foot traffic, and good areas for outdoor stays along the streets and in direct relation to residences, public buildings, places of work, and so forth. Here it is possible to see buildings, people coming and going, and people stopping in outdoor areas near the buildings because the outdoor spaces are easy

and inviting to use. This city is a living city, one in which spaces inside buildings are supplemented with usable outdoor areas, and where public spaces are allowed to function. . . .

In a survey recording all activities occurring in the center of Copenhagen during the spring and summer of 1986, it was found that the number of pedestrian streets and squares in the city center had tripled between 1968 and 1986. Parallel to this improvement of the physical conditions, a tripling in the number of people standing and sitting was recorded.

In cases where neighboring cities offer varying conditions for city activities, great differences can also be found.

In Italian cities with pedestrian streets and automobile-free squares, the outdoor city life is often much more pronounced than in the car-oriented neighboring cities, even though the climate is the same.

A 1978 survey of street activities in both trafficked and pedestrian streets in Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide, Australia, carried out by architectural students from the University of Melbourne and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology found a direct connection between street quality and street activity. In addition, an experimental improvement of increasing the number of seats by 100 per cent on the pedestrian street in Melbourne resulted in an 88 per cent increase in seated activities.

William H. Whyte, in his book *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, describes the close connection between qualities of city space and city activities and documents how often quite simple physical alterations can improve the use of the city space noticeably.

Comparable results have been achieved in a number of improvement projects executed in New York and other US cities by the Project for Public Spaces.

In residential areas as well, both in Europe and the United States, traffic reduction schemes, courtyard clearing, laying out of parks, and comparable outdoor improvements have had a marked effect.